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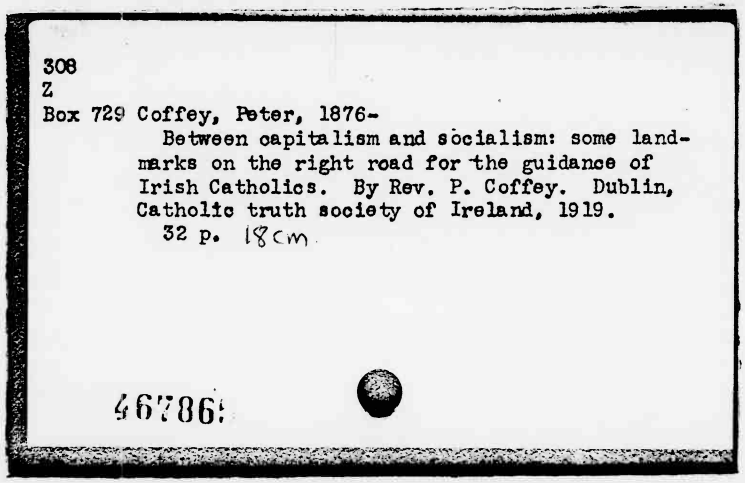
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# BETWEEN CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM:

## SOME LANDMARKS ON THE RIGHT ROAD FOR THE GUIDANCE OF IRISH CATHOLICS.

BY

REV. P. COFFEY, PH.D.,

*Maynooth College.*

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# Days

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1919.

FOREWORD.

The following pages are in substance a reprint of a series of notes which appeared in the Dublin *Leader* in April, May and June, 1919. They are here presented, however, in a different order and with many additions and modifications.—P.C.

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# Between Capitalism and Socialism:

## SOME LANDMARKS ON THE RIGHT ROAD, FOR THE GUIDANCE OF IRISH CATHOLICS.

BY

Rev. P. COFFEY, Ph.D.,

*Maynooth College.*

It is widely hoped and believed that we are moving towards a self-governing Irish State. How is such a State to set about making the sources of Irish wealth—agricultural, industrial and commercial—subserve the interests and the well-being of the Irish nation? Certain ideals are nowadays widely suggested—the diffusion of small ownership in land and capital; the encouragement of joint ownership and of co-operation in production and distribution; State prevention of the amassment of excessive individual wealth; State intervention and direction to secure effectively that the owners of productive wealth make a right use and not an arbitrary use of this wealth—*i.e.* that they conduct their industry, trade and commerce in a manner not detrimental but beneficial to the whole nation. Excellent ideals these—I put aside the Socialist ideal of all-round nationalisation of productive wealth as economically disastrous — but it will require the best brain and intellect and goodwill of Irishmen to think out and apply *just and equitable* means of realising those ideals.

## The State not Infallible.

In its efforts to realise such economic and social reforms, in the means it adopts to realise them, the State—the Irish State, or any other State—may sometimes make mistakes without doing injustice to anyone; it may embark on policies which entail on the nation *economic loss* rather than gain; for the State is not infallible economically any more than ethically. But it may sometimes make *worse than economic mistakes;* it may adopt policies which, whether economically sound or foolish, are *ethically wrong because unjust to some section of the citizens.*

Does natural human reason—I mean *right* reason, reason enlightened by true knowledge of the nature and destiny of man and his purpose on earth—dictate any clear test of what is right and what is wrong in State regulation or measures in the economic domain? "Whatever State action is clearly necessary for the common good, or clearly helpful to the common good, such action the State can lawfully take?" Yes, in a certain sense that is a truism; but of itself it does not carry us very far. For—assuming that we know what the "common good" means: the temporal well-being of *the whole community*, not of a majority or section, however large, but the protection of the natural rights of *each and all*—the trouble is just to determine whether this or that particular State policy is required or justified by the common good. And we know that the wildest and most revolutionary politico-economic theories are propounded and advocated and defended precisely on the plea that the common good requires that the State adopt them and carry them into practice.

What, for instance, are we to say about the cry sometimes heard nowadays, that "no individual's right of private ownership can override the higher right of the whole community asserted by the State,[1] as the origin of the community"? It is just as ambiguous and just as capable of right and wrong interpretations as the opposite cry that "a man can do what he likes with his own." And it is the wrong interpretation, the one which puts them in mischievous conflict, that is commonly attached to both of them in the actual turmoil of economic controversy and conflict.

[1] To avoid misunderstanding, I may say that I mean by the State the organ of social authority within the commonwealth. It results from the natural association of the people for the protection of individual rights and for the advancement of the good of all. The authority is not for itself or for some public good as distinct from the good of individuals. It is for the good of individuals as belonging to the State.



It is utterly untrue and un-Christian to assert that a man can do "what he likes" even with what is in all strictness "his own": by wantonly destroying or abusing temporal goods which are "his own" he may not indeed be doing an injustice to any other determinate individual, but he is none the less acting immorally and sinfully. But of course not all the private property of individual proprietors is "their own" in the sense that they have *exclusive rights to its use and control;* there is much of it in regard to which the proprietor's claim to such exclusive use and control would be gravely wrong and unjust to the whole community. There are connected with private ownership several "powers and uses" which are not at all "exclusive individual rights," but are rather "separable privileges and prerogatives" which the Social Authority of the State has allowed to attach to such ownership in the existing economic regime, and could therefore detach from it at any time without injustice to the "owners."

## "Rights" of Ownership not Absolute.

For instance, the individual landowner's claim to "unearned increment" is not an exclusive or individual *natural right*, but only a prerogative which has the validity of a right merely by the tolerance of the State's Social Sanction: the State could take it over at any time (for the "common good") without violating any private *right* of the landowner. Similarly, in the prevailing economic regime capitalists have enjoyed an almost unchecked and uncontrolled power to regulate wages: the State can (for the "common good") control and limit and lessen this economic power of the capitalist without inflicting any injustice on him. He has no *right* that this prerogative be prolonged indefinitely. Nay, the State *is bound* to interfere with it if the "common good" requires such interference. And surely it does. Too

long have *wages* been subordinated to *profits and interest* by uncontrolled capitalism; whereas the labourer's right to a decent living wage *is on a distinctly higher moral plane than rights to profit or interest*. It springs directly from the natural law *as a first charge* on the economic product. And the State—the Social Authority accountable for the economic system prevailing in the community—*is bound* to see that this sacred natural right is made effective for the individual worker.

These few examples illustrate the power which the State has to define and limit the prerogatives attaching to private ownership. It clearly involves the right of the State to control the economic forces of production and distribution. It is clear, moreover, that this latter power is one whose exercise is of the greatest possible moment to the general temporal well-being of the whole community; that *de facto* in the present economic regime it attaches to uncontrolled private ownership of the sources of wealth; that nevertheless it is manifestly a power which the State by virtue of its Social Authority has both the right and the duty to supervise and control, and so to direct that it be exercised for the common good, and not in the exclusive interest of the proprietary class and to the detriment of the larger masses of the citizens. In a word, it is one of those prerogatives which do not belong by inalienable natural right to private ownership of productive wealth, but can be wholly or partially separated from it at any time by the jurisdiction of the State.

### The Natural Law on Ownership of Productive Wealth.

How far do the individual owner's strict natural rights of private ownership extend, to the exclusion of all right of interference by the State? Not very far. The natural law gives every individual a right to a reasonable opportunity of living by his industry from the fruits of the earth; and this implies, as the normal means to that end, the natural right to a fair opportunity of obtaining exclusive private ownership of some "productive wealth."[2] The

[2] The right of access, direct or indirect, to a share of the world's natural sources of wealth for the purpose of exploiting these by labour and thereby gaining a sustenance from them—this is what the



natural law dictates some reasonable division of the "productive wealth" of the earth (land and nature's other resources) among men as necessary for the continued subsistence and progress of mankind on earth.[3] But the natural law itself makes no actual division. The abstract right which it dictates and sanctions is translated into concrete individual rights of ownership of this or that particular field or piece of capital by one of a series of particular historical acts or occurrences known as "titles of ownership." Some of these are capable of validly conferring individual ownership up to a certain point by the natural law itself and independently of all State Authority. But *the natural law itself* does not authorize the individual to acquire, by such "natural" title, *ownership of more productive wealth, or the right of access to more productive wealth, than is reasonably necessary for yielding through his individual industry a decent human livelihood*: which includes, of course, the means to marry, support and educate a family, and reasonably develop all his human faculties—physical, mental, moral and religious.[4] And, furthermore, the validity of any such natural title, its moral efficacy in conferring ownership of that amount of produc-

natural law guarantees. This implies *normally*, as I have said, the right to some exclusive *private ownership* of productive wealth; not, however, *essentially*: it is conceivable that men could exploit and live by the world's sources of wealth without any exclusive individual ownership of these. Hence this latter right is commonly considered to presuppose the contingent fact of a tacit convention or agreement of the human race, and to be based therefore on the "*jus gentium*" or "law of nations," rather than on the "*jus naturae*" or "natural law" itself. Cf. "How far may a Catholic agree with Socialists?" by Rev. Fr. Canavan, S.J. (C.T.S.)

[3] We must take the human race as we find it. If men had retained their original innocence, if they were perfect and not fallen, Communism or Socialism would be feasible. See below, pp. 27-29.

[4] This natural minimum of individually owned capital need not be conceived as an isolated portion worked exclusively by the individual and his family. Only in very primitive conditions could such a system prevail. In civilized society we have specialized labour and exchange of products. But the natural law itself (apart from what Social Sanction may allow over and above, for the common good) gives no individual an exclusive and indefeasible right to more productive wealth or capital than will, through his labour, keep himself and his family in decent and befitting conditions of life.

tive wealth, is justified in ultimate analysis by *its social necessity—i.e.*, by the undeniable fact that the system of private ownership to this extent is necessary for general human welfare. The Social Authority of the State is, therefore, bound not to interfere with, but to respect and sanction the operation and effects of every such "natural" title to ownership.

### Private Ownership of Surplus Wealth a Stewardship.

But if an individual has acquired a larger share of productive wealth than he needs for a decent human livelihood, his right *to the surplus* is valid only because and in so far as the Social Authority of the State has allowed and sanctioned his title to it. Thus, there are titles to ownership which derive their validity not from the natural law but from positive State Sanction. From which two things are obvious: First, that what justifies the State in sanctioning such titles to surplus private ownership (and the economic power accompanying it) is *the common good of the whole community*, for which the State is responsible; and secondly, that the ownership so conferred on the individual, so far from being an arbitrary power to "do what he likes with his own," is rather *a stewardship* for the right exercise of which, in the interests of his fellow citizens generally, the private proprietor is responsible to all of them collectively, and to the State which represents them.

### Obligation to Administer it for the Good of the Community.

Now the prevailing division of productive wealth, which has worked out actually from the play of economic forces and historical causes, in Ireland as in every other country, is very unequal indeed. But it must not be allowed to obscure this fundamental and incontrovertible principle: The natural right of every human individual that such a division of the world's productive wealth among private owners be made and maintained as will afford every individual a



reasonable opportunity of securing a decent human livelihood by his industry, is *prior to, and more fundamental and sacred than*, the right which any private owner can have to a larger share of productive wealth than he actually needs for the same decent human livelihood. He may actually possess a larger share; he may validly "own" a larger share; but his "ownership" of it, his right to control and use it, is subordinate to his fellow-man's right to live, and entails the duty (which the State can make him discharge, or get others to discharge if he refuses) of *administering it for the good of the community*. Therefore the State, in virtue of its Social Authority, has the right and the duty of so defining, limiting, supervising and controlling acquired proprietary rights, that *all* the members of the community will *have their fundamental natural right to reasonable access to the means of livelihood protected and made effective*.

These few principles, indicated all too briefly, will help us to appreciate the nature and grounds and lawful extent of State interference with existing proprietary "rights." The economic trouble with the world is not that there is a division of the world's productive wealth among private individuals (as socialists maintain); nor is it that the division is unequal, as I will point out presently; but it is that large private ownership has been allowed an economic power over the masses, which it has wrongfully and tyrannically exercised to the detriment of society generally.

### Inequality of Ownership Natural and Necessary.

Not merely in the world generally, but in each individual State or country, some inequality of ownership of productive wealth, as between individuals, or groups, syndicates, companies, etc., is an inevitable natural fact in which there is nothing inherently wrong. But, more than this, some degree of inequality of such ownership is economically necessary for the continuous effective production and distribution of the necessaries of life among men. And why? Because the constant supplying of these commodities requires much division and specialisation of labour, implies large scale production, and thus necessitates that productive wealth

or raw materials be allowed to pass more largely into the ownership and control of some individuals or groups than of others. Nor would joint or co-operative or syndicalist ownership remove this inequality within the individual State, any more than the existence of a thoroughly socialist State or States would remove it from the world generally. Such States, and such syndicates within each State, would be unequally wealthy groups of human individuals: the equal sharers in the capital of one group would still be richer, or poorer, than the equal sharers in the larger, or smaller, capital of the neighbouring group.

Within the individual State, Socialism would, of course, abolish practically all individual ownership of *productive* wealth (land and capital); but it would recognise and admit unequal ownership of *consumers'* wealth in accordance with natural inequality of talent, skill, industry, etc., among individual men.

Many unthinking or ill-informed people, especially if they have listened to ambiguous socialist declamations about the equal rights of all men to the goods of the earth, entertain curiously erroneous fancies about the supposed beneficent effects of a perfectly equal redistribution of the world's actual wealth and sources of wealth among all the inhabitants of the earth. If all the actual *consumers'* wealth [5] available in the world at a given time were divided equally among all, and if they were to live on it and suspend all further production, how long would it keep them alive? *For a few months*—and then starvation! So that continuance of life depends absolutely on the *continuous application of productive labour* to the world's *productive wealth* or *raw materials*. Suppose, then, that all these latter—all land and capital—were simultaneously redistributed in absolutely equal shares among all men, for each separately to make the most of his share, what would happen? Utter paralysis of economic production, a tragic food crisis, and

[5] "*Consumers'* wealth": food, clothes, houses, etc., and in general all goods, utilities or services which are used up in supplying human wants and not employed as a means to produce other goods: as distinguished from "*productive* wealth," or land, capital and raw materials generally. Money can represent either kind of wealth according to the use to which it is turned.



a reversion of the race to primitive savagery. And the experiment, if confined to a single country, would have similar results in that country.[6]

### Equal Redistribution Unthinkable.

Hence, no State could lawfully attempt such an experiment of equal redistribution of land and capital among all its individual citizens, for the simple reason that the "common good" could not possibly be thereby promoted, but would on the contrary be destroyed and ruined. And, moreover—another reason—such action would inevitably violate the strict natural right of the individual citizens *to the opportunity of securing a livelihood from their country's resources*, inasmuch as the individual citizens—at least multitudes of them—even with their individual shares of "raw material," would be utterly unable to make a living by working them, owing to the resulting *chaotic dislocation and paralysis of the existing highly complex system of co-operative and specialised labour in production and distribution.*

Similarly, no State could lawfully attempt within the area of its jurisdiction to reintroduce a condition of "primitive communism," or to abolish all private ownership of *productive* wealth and thus establish a socialist regime, because (apart from many other reasons) such action of the State would violate the strict natural right of *existing private owners of productive wealth* in so far as it would deprive them even of that portion which would yield them a decent human livelihood—for to so much at least the law of nature itself gave them a strict right with which the State has no lawful power to interfere, and with which the "common good" or "social necessity" demands that the State must not interfere.

We see thus that not only private ownership, but *inequality of private ownership*, of productive wealth, can be socially useful and necessary. And according as we realise the necessity of keeping up and even increasing the continuous output of the world's food and necessaries of

[6] If ownership of productive wealth were more widely diffused by a *gradual* process which, while extending co-operative or share ownership, would *safeguard productive efficiency and output*, the social results could hardly be other than beneficial.

life by the operation of productive human labour on the world's natural sources of wealth; according as we realise how much the efficiency of the whole productive process depends upon allowing individuals or groups to acquire that power and control which we call "private ownership" over much larger quantities of the sources of wealth than they need *for themselves*—in order to "work" these more economically and efficiently, and so *to make the necessaries of life more plentiful and more easily available and accessible to all*—the more we shall feel inclined to admit and recognise that unequal private ownership of the world's productive wealth by individual men is in principle *neither wrong nor unjust nor unnatural*, but is on the contrary *socially useful and necessary*.

### The Real Evil—Excessive Inequality of Ownership.

*Some* inequality, yes; and therefore the State—call it, if you like, the "capitalist" State—in permitting some inequality, is so far right and can by no means be taken to task. But *such inequality as actually exists*, emphatically no! And herein the capitalist State is terribly to blame. But what then? Is the existing regime to be mended or ended, because of its too-long-tolerated abuses? "End it!" cries the Socialist. And put a brand new one in its place? But unfortunately it is not given to man to create a new world. We must take the one we have and make the best of it. Let us not quarrel about names—"mending" or "ending," "reform" or "reconstruction." It is the measures that count. We are all agreed that the abuses have got to be ended; that the system calls for much overhauling, reform, reconstruction; that inequality of ownership has been culpably allowed by the State to pass all endurable limits; and that the State has not only the right but the urgent and imperative duty to remedy these intolerable economic wrongs and readjust the balance of equitable economic opportunity among its citizens.

### The State can and ought to Remedy the Evil.

As long as a title to ownership has the sanction of the State's social authority it remains a valid title, even though it be not (or have ceased to be) a reasonable device



for social welfare—*i.e.*, for securing to men generally a fair opportunity of access to the goods of the earth; but in that case the State can step in and render such title invalid by withdrawing the sanction of social authority from it.[7] It can lawfully bring this power to bear, not on the individual's private ownership of *a certain margin or minimum* of productive wealth guaranteed to him by the natural law and the common good or social necessity, but on his ownership of *the surplus* beyond this margin, a surplus which is often considerable, a surplus whose ownership it is that gives private capitalists the immense economic powers, privileges and prerogatives which they actually exercise, and often very far from beneficently, in the present regime. But all such prerogatives, attaching to large private ownership of productive wealth, are entirely subordinate to the common good, and therefore to the authority of the State. If these prerogatives have been and are being abused throughout the world by capitalists, the State is morally bound to take effective measures to stop such abuse.

### The Catholic Church Declares the Duty of the Rich—

And the Church is bound to advise and encourage the State to take effective action in the direction of righting such wrongs and adjusting the economic balance of equitable opportunity among men to secure the means of livelihood. The Catholic Church has always taught that the owner of wealth is only its steward; that he owns in the strict sense only what he reasonably needs for his life as an individual, as a member of the domestic society or family, and as a member of the civil society or State; that his "ownership" of the surplus is a right which is also and identically *an obligation*, inasmuch as he "owns" this surplus only to administer it for the benefit and use of his fellow-men.[8] But this teaching is ignored alto-

[7] Cf. Ryan, *Distributive Justice*, p. 150, and *passim*; Kelleher, *Distributive Justice* (a critique of Dr. Ryan's book) in the *Irish Theological Quarterly*, October, 1917 (p. 354), and January, 1918 (pp. 7-9).

[8] For samples of the teaching of the early Fathers of the Church, of Dr. Ryan's *Alleged Socialism of the Church Fathers* (Herder, 1913).

gether outside the Church; and even within the fold of the Church it is only partially effective. For there is no denying the fact that the wealthy classes generally repudiate the notion that they are *morally bound* to administer their wealth in anyone's interest but their own; and that they seem to regard even almsgiving to the poor rather as a work of supererogation than as the discharge of a most grave moral obligation.

### —AND HELPS THE STATE TO PROMOTE JUSTICE AMONG MEN.

For this "hardness of men's hearts" of course the Church is not to blame. But seeing that it is a fact; that the Church's teaching and moral suasion produces no deep impression on a wicked world; that in the interests of humanity and for the common well-being of mankind coercive force is required to maintain anything like an equitable adjustment of economic relations among men; and that the State alone can enforce by its authority an equitable system of exploiting the world's wealth and distributing the products of industry among men—is it not plain that the Church, *while it is no part of her mission to frame or dictate any political or economic system for mankind*, must nevertheless consider it her duty to point out economic abuses which are moral wrongs, and to welcome and approve every just exercise of the State's coercive authority in its endeavours to remove them? But it is the State itself—or, if you will, the people through the agency of the State—that must take the initiative and carry out such reforms. And the moral teaching, advice and guidance of the Church will be always available to help them. Let us see, then, what can be said of a few test cases of State interference with the prerogatives attaching to what I have called *surplus* ownership in the capitalist regime.

### EXPROPRIATION WITH COMPENSATION OF DISPOSSESSED PROPRIETORS.

And first, as to interference coupled with full compensation. There can be no difficulty about the right of the State to take over any particular form or quantity of productive wealth from its private owners (whether in order



to retain this ownership itself or to transfer it to other private individuals), provided the common good requires such a measure (as it often does) and *provided the dispossessed owners are adequately compensated*. For *adequate* compensation really means giving the individual one form, or one concrete piece, of private property of equal value in exchange for that taken over. If the exchange is effected by cash or government stock, this represents real capital value. It is the community that pays—from the taxpayers' contributions to the public treasury—for value received. And if the State transfers the acquired property to other private individuals, it may do so by selling or leasing, or (with the consent of the community) even by free gift if the common good so requires.

Or the State may effect the transfer of property from one set of private owners to another by lending its credit to the buyers to help them to pay, and by supplementing their price by a "bonus" or compensation to the sellers from the public treasury—as in the case of Irish Land Purchase. And, needless to say, the State can effect such transfers compulsorily should the common good require it. It is worthy of remark, too, in passing, that in all such proceedings as this, the State, by compensating owners whom it dispossesses, *is recognising the validity* (in principle and in practice) *of private ownership of productive wealth*: which is the very antithesis of the extreme Socialist doctrine that all private ownership of productive wealth is immoral. Yet how many have raised the cry of "Socialism" at such a mild form of State interference!

It is difficult to hazard an opinion as to whether or how far or at what rate operations of this kind, helped out by State credit, but always giving *adequate compensation*—i.e., *full equivalent capital value*, to the dispossessed parties, is likely to alleviate the existing economic evils of the capitalist system by rectifying the prevailing inequitable distribution of productive wealth. Judging by the effects of Irish Land Purchase, I should be slow to deny that such State operations may be very beneficial indeed. But still, when we remember that the dispossessed parties, *fully compensated*, may immediately acquire ownership of just as much productive wealth in some other concrete form, it is not easy to see how the continued

concentration of such wealth in the hands of a small minority is prevented, or its greater diffusion facilitated. Still, even this object is partly attained at least in so far as the parties are compensated in Government Stock, which merely secures to them their annual *incomes*. And this, of course, is the usual form assumed by the process of "buying out" private capitalists on the part of the State.

When Socialists demand that the State take over the ownership of privately owned land and capital they generally suggest this form of compensation—the payment of proportionate State annuities for a number of years to the dispossessed parties and their immediate heirs or representatives. This, however, would be only *partial* and not *adequate* compensation. But the moment we raise the question of the State "taking over" productive wealth from private owners, and giving them *only partial compensation* or *no compensation at all*, we are clearly face to face with a different and far more serious proposition than that of "buying out" (even compulsorily) *with full compensation*. Since there is only a difference in degree, and not in kind, between partial compensation and no compensation, the same principles will apply to both.

This, then, is the next case for discussion: compulsory State expropriation of *surplus* ownership *without adequate compensation*. Let it be noted that there is no question of the State stripping the individual capitalist of *all* his productive wealth, as the Socialist would advocate. There is at least a *minimum* to which the natural law gives him a strict personal right, and which the State can never be justified in taking over—at least without such adequate compensation as would enable him to secure ownership of an equal amount of productive wealth in some other concrete form.

### The State already partially expropriates in many ways without Compensation.

The State has often already so interefered, and is indeed nowadays continually so interfering, with the individual's private control of his productive wealth (his land or capital)—by controlling prices, wages, conditions of production and distribution; by death duties, excess profit taxes, etc.—as to *lessen the value* of this productive wealth



*to its owner*. And the State thus diverts into other channels a portion of the economic product of his capital which would otherwise have accrued to himself. That is to say, in practice and in effect the State deprives him, without compensation, of some of his capital, namely, the portion represented by the diverted proceeds. It has done so on the plea that the common good has necessitated and therefore justified such action. And who will be so bold as to deny that, whatever about the actual cases that have happened, at least the contingency can arise when the common good will clearly justify such procedure?

So when we inquire whether the State can ever lawfully take or transfer productive wealth from its private owners without compensating them, we are not by any means asking can it lawfully do some new thing (to be qualified by uncomplimentary adjectives such as "revolutionary," "wicked," "Bolshevistic," etc.),[9] which it has never before attempted. On the contrary, we are inquiring about a procedure which is actually and extensively taking place, and which is at least conceivably quite justifiable.

### Different Ways of Applying the Same Principle.

It may be objected that all that sort of State control and interference is very different from the State actually laying its hands, so to speak, on land, or mines, or mills, plant, machinery, raw materials, etc., and taking them from their present owners without compensation.[10] I admit there is a difference in the mode or form of expropriation, but where is the difference in principle, in substance, or in effect? There are very many ways in which the social authority of the State can, in the interests of the common good, gradually effect a more equitable distribution of pro-

[9] The capitalist class, and the capitalist Press, are not above the device of shibboleths. They easily raise the cry of "Socialism!", "Bolshevism!", etc., to prejudice Catholics against projects of social and economic reform that are really both just and opportune.

[10] There is no question of total expropriation without any compensation. Cf. what was said above about the naturally inalienable and inviolable *minimum of productive wealth* that an individual may own.

ductive wealth than by taking this, that, or the other field or factory or warehouse from A, who has too much, and giving it to B, who has none at all. One way may be wiser than another, but it is with the *principle* of expropriation without compensation that we are now concerned.

## State Interference with Capital: the Words and the Facts.

Brought up as we all have been in the economic atmosphere of the capitalist regime, with its over-emphasis of the supposed "rights" and "inviolability" of private property, and with its conspiracy of silence as to the inherent moral obligations and the rightful natural limitations of private property, and its essential subordination to the sacred right of all men to have access to the means of living decent human lives—we are naturally inclined to feel shocked at the assertion that the State, by virtue of its social authority and in the interests of the common good, can lay hold of privately accumulated productive wealth, and *without compensating its accumulators* give over its control and exploitation to those who by their labour will produce and distribute its fruits among those for whom God intended them. And when we imagine the exercise of this State authority taking some novel or unusual form—forced upon it perhaps by the urgency of the ills to be remedied—we are inclined to cry out: "But this is rank confiscation! And is not confiscation mere robbery? How, then, can it possibly be lawful?" Let us, however, not frighten ourselves with words. They often do frighten us—until we look steadily at the facts underneath them. I have already said on the first of these pages that a thing is not lawful merely because the State does it, and does it in the name of the common good. The State may indeed do wrong, act unjustly, even rob and plunder. But I will try to show presently how the common good can conceivably justify the State in the thing itself, the fact, the procedure which we are actually discussing. Let me make an observation first, however, about such disquieting, scandal-giving words as "expropriation," "confiscation," etc.



### What is Confiscation?

The word "confiscation" perhaps commonly carries with it the suggestion of a procedure that is not quite right and proper—the suggestion of an interference with rights. But the thing itself is quite indifferent: it may be right or it may be wrong. All taxation is "confiscation" in the original and etymological meaning of the word—taking wealth from the private citizen and transferring it to the public "fisc" or treasury. So, for the public good and in the discharge of its ordinary functions, the State can "confiscate" or take over some of the wealth which the private individual owns—and, of course, can quite lawfully do so. Nay, we have heard the project recently mooted of the State making a levy on capital—or, in other words, "confiscating" a share of the *productive* wealth owned by individual citizens. Whether such a mode of taxation be economically wise or foolish, it will scarcely be denied that the State can lawfully have recourse to it if the responsible government decides that in the circumstances the common good requires it. So the idea of the State, by its action, extinguishing the individual citizen's "ownership" of some of his productive wealth by "confiscation," is by no means novel, so far as the principle of the thing is concerned. But this is partial "expropriation" of private owners? Of course it is. But State "expropriation," like State "confiscation," may conceivably be quite lawful and justifiable. To brand it as "robbery" is simply begging the whole question.

### "Rights" and "Prerogatives."

Let us consider the thing itself, apart from the fog and mist of prejudicial parts of speech. What I have just said about taxation, and about the thousand indirect ways in which the State is already *de facto* transferring productive wealth from its private owners without compensation, will have helped to illustrate my earlier assertion that the bulk of what are commonly described as the "rights" of private ownership of productive wealth are rather powers and prerogatives tolerated by the social sanction of the State, and that they can accordingly be limited or extinguished by withdrawal of that sanction as far as the common good

requires it. And remember, it is those very powers of control and administration, powers of directing production and determining distribution of the economic product, that constitute the very essence of ownership of productive wealth. So that if the private capitalist is effectively deprived of them in substance and in fact by the action of the State, however indirect and complex this action may be, he is no longer really the owner of that wealth. Under the operation of such State interference he may be allowed to continue as "owner," and he may be such ostensibly and in name. But it will be only in name. All that his former ownership gave him, and especially that power over the conditions of life and means of subsistence of multitudes of his fellow-men—a power so shockingly abused in the economic regime that has prevailed under the name of capitalism for now more than a century—will have passed effectively from his grasp. This power over the conditions of life of vast multitudes of human beings is inseparably connected with that real control of productive wealth which real ownership of such wealth implies—connected as effect with cause. The excessive concentration of that control in the hands of a small minority (comparatively), and the abuse of the consequent power it gave them over the conditions of life of the vast majority who constitute the landless and non-proprietary proletariat, are among the most crying evils of unchecked private capitalism.

### Readjustment Imperative. Danger of Delay.

The common good seems to demand imperatively that the social authority of States should intervene to secure a wider and more equitable diffusion and distribution of real ownership and effective control of the world's productive wealth among larger multitudes of individual men. Indeed the danger is that this social authority of States has not been vigorously exercised in time to avert the catastrophe of widespread revolutionary economic and social upheavals; that the intolerable abuses and evils of the capitalist system have been allowed by Governments to go so long unredressed that the labouring masses everywhere seem to have lost patience, and to be actually taking over into their own hands the function of economic



readjustment which their Governments should have discharged but did not. Such an experiment is bound to be violent. We have got a name for it—Bolshevism. When the worm turns do we blame the worm? . . . . Who are responsible for Bolshevism? . . . .

A peaceful and orderly "expropriation" or "confiscation" of the *surplus* productive wealth that is held in the control of the few, and its gradual effective redistribution among the many—in other words, a policy of economic readjustment by gradual diffusion of moderate private proprietorship (through co-operative or group or guild ownership, or by a variety of other reasonable devices)—if carried out with the social authority of the State, might indeed be distasteful to large capitalists, but it would presumably be preferable to Bolshevism. It *would* be distasteful to the capitalists, for no matter what form it took[11] it would inevitably imply some curtailment of their "ownership," and of what they call their "rights," *i.e.* those powers and prerogatives of which the State tolerates their exercise so long as this does not conflict with the common good, but which, precisely because of this qualification, the State has both the right and the duty to alienate from them in the measure in which the well-being of the whole community requires such alienation.

There is nothing so inviolable or sacrosanct about the private ownership of productive wealth that the State may not touch it in the interests of the common good. For the sake of illustration take the case of an individual capitalist who enjoys an income of £50,000 a year from capital of the value of about £1,000,000. Over how much of this capital does the natural law give him such a strict right of exclusive control that neither the State nor any third party can justly and lawfuly interfere with it? It is neither possible nor necessary to define the exact figure; but undoubtedly it would be a comparatively small fraction of the whole. And over the large surplus, does his

[11] I assume throughout that, just as in taxation, so also in any and every State scheme of economic readjustment, the State is bound to observe distributive justice—to apportion all burdens, restrictions, confiscations, etc., according to the economic capacity of the individual citizens affected.

" ownership " imply any kind or degree of moral power which the State may not terminate and take from him *should the common good really demand such State action?*

### The State and Surplus Private Ownership.

It implies no such exclusive moral power in the circumstances contemplated. His title of ownership to the surplus capital and its fruits is justified, not by his natural need of it for his personal sustenance (for he does not need it), but exclusively by the utility of such ownership *to his fellow-men*, and is based exclusively on the social sanction conferred on it by the State in view of this utility. If, therefore, the social utility of such private surplus ownership generally has ceased, if it has become rather a social evil, its justification has disappeared, and the State can, in the interests of the common good, limit it accordingly.

The capitalist system has fostered in society very reverential notions—indeed, perhaps, superstitious notions—on the " rights of property," the sacredness of what we call " ownership " of the goods of the earth. It would almost seem as if man were made for these goods, and not they for him! I wish we could learn to entertain somewhat more reverential notions, more worthy and humane notions, on the sacredness and dignity of human life and personality. Surely the individual lives and persons of the humblest and most abject of our fellow-men are neither mere " goods and chattles," nor things to be subordinated to goods and chattels. Yet it is not unfrequently suggested nowadays that circumstances may more readily justify the State in interfering with the personal liberty and life of the private citizen than in interfering with his " property." Many good people may be shocked and scandalised at the contention that any conceivable emergency could possibly justify a sweeping and drastic " conscription of wealth " by the State, while they find no trouble in justifying the State for the " conscription of human lives " by the million. One would think at all events that the former sort of State action should be more easily justifiable on grounds of public welfare than the latter. Yet I venture to say that many of the strongest advocates of universal compulsory military service would most vehemently deny that the general welfare of the community could ever justify



the State in " expropriating " large capitalists, " confiscating " their surplus productive wealth, and readjusting the control of it so as to make possible a somewhat less inequitable distribution of at least the elementary requisites of a decent livelihood among the millions who have to go without them in the existing economic regime. I suggest that in such an attitude there is something anomalous. It is one of the paradoxes of a mentality warped in its ethical appreciation of human values by the fixed ideas of capitalist economics.

### Conscription of Property and Conscription of Lives.

I am not concerned to discuss here the morality of compulsory military service. I merely observe that there seems to be pretty general agreement in according to the State, at least in principle, this very terrible power of seizing the individual citizen and obliging him to undertake a service which often means for him practical certainty of violent death in the prime of life. I mean, it is generally recognised that the State has the strict moral right, the requisite social authority, so to use the very lives and persons of the individual citizens, should the State decide that the common welfare demands such a policy. I am aware that many Catholic moralists cannot see their way very clearly to find fully cogent moral grounds for including such a moral power among the prerogatives of Supreme Social Authority. But let us suppose that military conscription *is* in principle lawful. Reflect now, just ever so little, on the right I have been claiming for the State to exercise another and much less terrible form of conscription—the right of the State to " conscript " or " confiscate " or " take over " or " redistribute " the *surplus* productive wealth of those of its citizens who have a surplus. (Whichever term we use, the underlying idea is the same, and we all know what it is: depriving the individual citizen of some or all of his *surplus* capital *without* compensation.)

### Nothing Immoral in the Principle of State Expropriation without Compensation.

Surely the lawfulness of the former State policy makes it antecedently probable that the latter State policy can be

lawful also. Men's wealth is not as sacred a thing as men's lives and liberties. If the State can lawfully take away the individual's personal liberty to pursue in peace his civil avocations, if it can imperil his very life, on the ground of social necessity, of promoting the general welfare of the community, surely this same ground can justify it in demanding the lesser sacrifice of the individual's surplus wealth. And remember, I am not defending any particular form of this policy of "taking over" by the State; I am concerned only with *the principle*. I have already remarked that the "taking over" process is already being actually carried out by the State in many indirect ways. But I say that *if public necessity should demand* an application in some measure even of the State policy of direct "confiscation" of surplus private capital, expropriation without compensation of its actual "owners," and redistribution of this productive wealth among another set of citizens to control and exploit it, the State would be justified by such public necessity in working out such a policy. Again, I do not discuss the economic wisdom or unwisdom of such a policy. I only contend that social conditions might conceivably arise in which such a policy would be ethically justifiable. If anyone is prepared to deny this latter assertion I must only leave him so, and let the impartial reader—or the impartial observer of present world-conditions—decide the issue for himself.

### Imperative Need of More Equitable Distribution of Wealth.

There are probably many who believe that conditions amply sufficient to justify such a policy prevail in many countries at the present moment. At all events there are millions to be fed who are hungry; millions to be housed who are homeless, herded in rooms or shelters unfit for beasts; millions whose natural right to live by their labour is effectively denied them; millions who by their labour produce wealth *for others*, and are denied their rightful share of the wealth so produced. These are wrongs which the State is bound to remedy; bound *in justice to the whole community*, and apart altogether from the disastrous consequences which may follow if they are left unremedied. They can be remedied only by securing that



*consumers'* wealth (the necessaries of life, food, clothing, houses, etc.) and *productive* wealth (land, capital) *pass effectively in sufficient measure into the possession and control* of those who need them but have them not—those who unfortunately have *only* their labour to live by. But the State cannot create either sort of wealth *ex nihilo*. It is in the hands of private owners—accumulated there excessively.[12] Therefore from them it must pass in sufficient measure to right existing wrongs and safeguard the public welfare. And since, as I remarked already, we need not hope that it will so pass without the compulsion of State authority, there is no alternative but that the State exercise that authority.

### Otherwise, Civil Wars Inevitable.

But no. There is unfortunately another and deplorable alternative: the State may be too late, and the transfer may be effected by—Civil War. Really, the capitalists of the world to-day have something worse to fear than the State application of a bloodless, orderly, well-considered and distributively just policy of peaceful, gradual redistribution of their surplus productive wealth among the multitudes whom the regime of excessive capitalism has inexorably shut out from all reasonable opportunity of sharing it heretofore. At all events, the Statesmen of any of the existing or nascent nations, great or small, who would boldly undertake to make the fullest use of the social authority of the State in achieving a more equitable distribution of the nation's sources of wealth among the citizens, even by a drastic policy of limiting private capitalism and gradually transferring surplus productive wealth from those who have a surplus to those who have none at all, would be real social reformers—not wreckers, plunderers, or revolutionaries—howsoever they might be denounced as such by the "law and order" class of capitalists. The ethics of such a policy would certainly leave less room for misgivings than that of the pre-war Statesmen who, with their exalted

[12] The Christian State—the State realizing the Catholic ideal—would have prevented such excessive accumulation of productive wealth by the few to the detriment of the community. And such a State will remedy the actual condition of things by adopting as its policy "to induce as many as possible of the humbler class to become owners" (Leo. XIII., *Condition of the Working Classes*).

notions of the sacred rights of private ownership (unlimited), and with a steady eye on the interests of capitalism, proclaimed so loudly that public right and justice, and the honour and common good of mankind, demanded a five years' slaughter of millions of human beings—to make (as they told us) the world safe for democracy.

At the same time, in their efforts to remedy the evils of capitalism, Statesmen and politicians and social reformers generally may go too far in this direction of restricting private ownership of capital. Socialism goes distinctly too far when it advocates the inauguration of a regime of public or collective ownership (*i.e.*, nationalisation or municipalisation) of *all* productive wealth.

### Socialism and Compensation.

It is hard to say how far present-day advocates of Socialism repudiate the manifestly unjust policy of *totally* expropriating existing private owners of such wealth without *any* compensation. I am aware that many of them favour the operation of such a scheme of compensation—during the period of transition to Socialism—as would leave the dispossessed owners, and to some extent their immediate descendants, in the enjoyment of what the Socialists would describe as reasonably just and even generous revenues from the new Socialist State. But the setting up of a Socialist regime, even with such compensation to the dispossessed capitalists, would still be worse than a grave economic blunder; for it would forcibly invade and violate the individual's *natural right* to own and control and exploit for his own and his family's sustenance and well-being *some* share of the world's sources of wealth.

### Why is Socialism Wrong?

This is but one of the many reasons why the Catholic Church warns us that the Socialist movement is dangerous and immoral in its tendencies. It is, however, a fundamental reason of the Church's opposition to Socialism. The substitution of this system for the prevailing system of private ownership would be *gravely unjust*, would inflict grave injustice by violating the natural rights of multitudes of men.

But, it will be said, the present economic system is also



violating the natural rights of great multitudes. Granted. But what follows? That the State can therefore substitute Socialism for it? By no means: two wrongs will never make a right. What then? That the State should let things be? Again, by no means; but that the State has both the right and the duty to reform the present economic system and eliminate its abuses.

### Socialism and the Common Good.

But what if the State should decide that the common good requires the abolition of *all* private ownership of productive wealth? I answer that in that case the State would decide wrongly. I am prepared to admit that if it could be proved that the common good *did* really require such abolition, the State could proceed to enforce it, and to establish a Socialist regime. For I recognise that even the individual's natural right to hold and control *some* productive wealth has a *social* aspect, inasmuch as the individual is also a *citizen*, and that it can be considered in its relation to, and its bearing upon, the natural right of every other member of the community to have fair access to the world's sources of subsistence. But this latter right, which every human being possesses from nature, cannot possibly so conflict with the system of private ownership resulting from "division of property" as to prove that this system is intrinsically and essentially wrong, or that "division of property" could never have conferred on any individual a *real and valid moral right* to hold and control some productive wealth as his own. No doubt the fundamental natural right of all members of the community to the means of subsistence can and does conflict with *the abuses and excesses* of the private ownership system. But then it must be remembered that on the one hand abuses and excesses are not rights, and on the other hand that their existence does not destroy the real and valid moral powers which *do* attach to the private ownership system, and which alone are rights: *abusus non tollit usum*.

### Socialism Unworkable and Chimerical.

If we indulge our fancy by imagining the hypothesis that no human individual ever claimed private ownership of productive wealth, if we make the supposition that all

men from the beginning *voluntarily agreed* that all productive wealth be held in common and owned by all collectively; or that this convention prevailed over some more or less extensive region of the earth; or that after the system of private ownership had long prevailed *all* the inhabitants (of the world, or of any region thereof) agreed to pool all the productive wealth (of the world, or of the particular region in question) and henceforth to hold and work this wealth in common—we open up fields of speculation which envisage human nature as it might conceivably be but *de facto* is not, and which will also get us to the true meaning of a *second line of argument* urged by Catholics against Socialism, namely, that " human nature being frail," Socialism " would not work."[13]

If human nature were not fallen, if the human race had preserved its original innocence, if the earth had not been cursed in consequence of original sin, but remained a terrestrial paradise, the fullest conceivable communism would harmonise perfectly with such conditions. But unfortunately we are not concerned with what right reason dictates regarding the control and use of the world's goods by a race of perfect men. The " supernatural law " on this matter for them would be different from the " natural law " on this same matter for the human race as we actually find it. For actual men right reason dictates, as the " natural law " of their relation to the goods of the earth, that the individual may acquire private ownership of *a share* of the sources of these goods. Individuals have done so; and as a consequence no individual can, without his own free consent, be rightfully compelled to surrender *all* private ownership.

### Religious Communism: Voluntary.

Of course he may surrender it *if he wishes*. If he wants to follow the more perfect way of working out his human destiny, to adopt the counsels of Christian perfection, he may pool his private possessions with others similarly minded, relinquish his private right of controlling and administerng them, and live the " common life " with

[13] Cf. *Towards the Republic*, by Aodh de Blácam (The Talbot Press).



which the " rule " of religious communities has familiarized the inhabitants of Christian countries.

### Socialism: Compulsory.

But to seek in this practice of voluntary renunciation an argument or analogy for Socialism is both silly and misleading. For in the first place there is all the ethical difference in the world between the *voluntary renunciation* made by the religious and the *compulsory expropriation* involved in setting up a Socialist regime—all the difference that makes the former an act of heroic virtue and the latter an infliction of grave moral wrong. And in the second place, the generality of men will never voluntarily forego or yield up their natural right to hold or to acquire the exclusive control known as " private ownership " of some share of the world's goods. But until they do Socialism cannot be lawfully attempted.

### Disastrous Social Effects of Socialism.

Let us, however, make the supposition that all the private owners in a certain country *did* agree (in what they conceived to be the interests of the common good) to pool their possessions and hand over all the productive wealth of the country to be owned collectively and administered by the State. I leave it to the reader to form his own opinion as to whether, while human nature is what it is, *all* the private owners in any State are ever likely to rise to such a level of pure and disinterested (even though mistaken) patriotism as to agree to such a procedure. But we can at all events imagine them doing so, and speculate as to what would be the consequences. If other States adhered to the institution of private ownership, just ask economists what would happen the trade relations of the new Socialist State with these other States. I believe they would predict sure and speedy ruin of the Socialist State's foreign trade under the unequal conditions of the new venture. But apart from that altogether, I think there is not the slightest doubt that the system " would not work." That is to say, it would speedily end in social and economic chaos, in paralysis of economic production, in general industrial stagnation and deadlock; and this precisely

because it is not in human nature for the average human individual to work "for the State," "for the common good," "for the benefit of his fellow-men," while he is deprived of the natural stimulus afforded by social recognition of his right to acquire by his industry exclusive ownership of even the smallest modicum of productive wealth. It is not my purpose to develop this general argument as it may be found developed in any standard Catholic work on the present subject, but rather merely to point out that the argument aims at proving the pure Socialist regime to be *so unworkable*, so inevitably doomed by its very nature to bring utter economic and social ruin on the people of any State, that it would be *far worse than an economic blunder*, that it would be not only economically unwise but also *ethically unjustifiable*, for any State to attempt to set up that regime, involving as it does the *total abolition* of the existing institution of private ownership of productive wealth.

The argument will remain valid as long as human nature remains what it is. The supposition that all the private owners in any existing State in the world to-day—or to-morrow or any time—would agree to renounce all their ownership is indeed a fanciful supposition. And even if they did, many of them would, I believe, live to see and regret the results of the Socialist experiment.

### Socialism and Human Perfectibility.

But might not the generality of men become so disinterested, so altruistic, so unselfish, as to agree to pool the nation's (or the world's) resources, and to work and live loyally each for the good of all? And so, might not the communism which has long been operative in the world on a small scale in the case of religious communities become generally practicable? Well, I fear the optimistic notion that followed in the wake of the evolutionist philosophy of the last century, the notion of man's indefinite perfectibility and steady upward progress on the moral plane, is rather at a discount in the world to-day. The happenings of the last five years have wrought a painful disillusioning of such hopes and dreams.

No doubt the *doctrinaire* Socialist will tell us that it is the inhuman evils of the capitalist system that have impeded and frustrated the moral uplift of humanity for which he yearns. Perhaps so; but after all is it not human nature that is responsible for this capitalist system, evils and all? And he will also assure us, only with a still greater apparent earnestness of conviction, that the actual working of the Socialist regime will call forth all that is best in man, will foster and develop his nobler instincts, and will finally so stifle the selfish instinct on which the system of private ownership is based that all will ultimately become willing Socialists and none ever want to revert to the regime of private ownership which still unfortunately prevails. There are indeed people who sincerely believe in this consummation, which they confidently prophesy for Socialism. And there is no arguing with prophets. If we disbelieve them and think them false prophets we can only pity them, and do our best to prevent people from being duped by their deceptive promises.



Moreover, the moral uplift which is thus fondly predicted as one of the *effects* of life under the Socialist regime, would have to be an *antecedent condition* already prevailing before the introduction of that regime could be held to be morally justifiable. For it is only on the (far-fetched) assumption that men generally *had already become* so disinterested, unselfish, and unworldly as to renounce of their own free will their natural right to private ownership as a means of making effective their right to subsistence, that the Socialist regime could be introduced without inflicting grave injustice and plunging society into a chaos of miseries.

### Socialism and Religion.

There is in the world one and only one influence which can uplift fallen human nature—Religion. Socialism is not Religion; its appeal is not to the higher human aspirations and impulses to which Religion specifically appeals. Nor is it by reason of its asking men to make sacrifices and lead better lives, but by reason of its promising to remedy material miseries and make life on earth more comfortable for the masses, that its appeal is so popular throughout the world. But, not being Religion, it does most harm just in so far as it arrogates to itself the function and mission of Religion. And it is precisely by making this wild claim for Socialism that its earlier protagonists in the

last century helped to make it a really irreligious and anti-religious movement.

Most of its later advocates make no such claim for it; they advocate it as an *economic system* pure and simple. But, as I have pointed out already, even purely economic systems, like all other human institutions, are necessarily amenable to ethical judgment. And, understanding by Socialism what I have taken to be its cardinal and essential idea—compulsory State abolition of all individual ownership of productive wealth—I cannot admit such a system to be ethically sound or justifiable.

### Catholic Socialists?

There is so much that is sound and good and laudable in the practical programmes of social reform adopted by socialists, or by people who think and call themselves socialists; the evils they seek to remedy are so manifest and intolerable; the sympathies of good and humane men go out so spontaneously to their efforts at amelioration, that any warning words uttered against what is wrong and unsound and evil in the system to which alone the title "Socialism" rightly belongs, may seem ungracious and unhelpful. But I have written no word in any merely carping or destructive spirit. To defend the lawfulness of private ownership is not to defend or palliate the abuse of it commonly known as "Capitalism." And to condemn "Socialism" is not to condemn or discourage the righting of social and economic wrongs. On the contrary, I think it cannot but prove helpful to the Irish Catholic worker to know what exactly it is that Catholic teaching forbids as ethically wrong and unjust and indefensible under the title of Socialism, and what wide measures of social and economic reform he can legitimately strive for within the limits of the moral law. What I have set down in the course of these pages will show what wide latitude there is for such reform within those limits. Since, however, the elastic title of "Socialism" properly belongs to a system which lies *outside* those limits, the Catholic who agitates for reforms which lie *within* them can gain nothing, and may expose himself to be misunderstood and misjudged, by calling himself a Socialist.

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### Catholic Socialists?

There is so much that is sound and good and laudable in the practical programmes of social reform adopted by socialists, or by people who think and call themselves socialists; the evils they seek to remedy are so manifest and intolerable; the sympathies of good and humane men go out so spontaneously to their efforts at amelioration, that any warning words uttered against what is wrong and unsound and evil in the system to which alone the title "Socialism" rightly belongs, may seem ungracious and unhelpful. But I have written no word in any merely carping or destructive spirit. To defend the lawfulness of private ownership is not to defend or palliate the abuse of it commonly known as "Capitalism." And to condemn "Socialism" is not to condemn or discourage the righting of social and economic wrongs. On the contrary, I think it cannot but prove helpful to the Irish Catholic worker to know what exactly it is that Catholic teaching forbids as ethically wrong and unjust and indefensible under the title of Socialism, and what wide measures of social and economic reform he can legitimately strive for within the limits of the moral law. What I have set down in the course of these pages will show what wide latitude there is for such reform within those limits. Since, however, the elastic title of "Socialism" properly belongs to a system which lies *outside* those limits, the Catholic who agitates for reforms which lie *within* them can gain nothing, and may expose himself to be misunderstood and misjudged, by calling himself a Socialist.


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